

Blogging for Change: Connecting Through Conversation

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC - safer healthier people.

[Neidra Wienreich] Before I start, let me just get a show of hands, this isn't like the quiz at the beginning where there's right and wrong answers, so don't worry. How many of you read one or blogs on a regular basis? Okay. How many of you have your own blog or write for your organization's blog? Okay. A couple. How many of you have maybe heard of blogs, but never actually seen one in the wild? Okay, so most people basically know what they are, so that's good.

Over the past few years, really in a short amount of time the perception of what blogs are has shifted from being seen as kind of the crazed rantings of lunatics and lonely people writing about their cats to much more of a legitimate form of media. It's becoming more within the mainstream media I think and they're becoming a credible source of news and information. People are turning to blogs to get a lot of their daily news now. It's becoming more and more common and actually expected now that organizations will have their own blog, sometimes in addition to just a regular static website and sometimes instead of. In fact, sometimes it seems that everybody has a blog these days and especially organizations that want to connect with and engage with the people that they're trying to reach. The rise of social media has really led to a new paradigm for how people are expecting to be reached with information. The people we traditionally have called our target audience now has a new name. We have to call them the people formerly known as the audience. More and more, people are no longer content to just passively receive information. They want to be able to engage with it and put their own spin on it. Personalize it and use it in ways where they can connect with other people. Blogs give power to the people. They can become a pundit, a reporter, a storyteller, an activist. Just a regular person can create a blog and be read by thousands or more people. As of April, there were about seventy million blogs that were being tracked by Technorati, which is one of the main blog search engines with about a hundred and twenty thousand new ones every day. A lot of those admittedly are splogs, spam blogs, but there's also a lot of very legitimate ones being created to and though many of these blogs that are being created have an audience of one, there are many more blogs that are being read by other people. In fact, according to the Pugh Internet Project, about thirty-nine percent of adult internet users read blogs. That translates to about fifty-seven million Americans and this is very relevant for us here because, according to other research, seventy-nine percent of internet users look for health and medical information online and much of what they find, if they're searching through Google for example, is information that's on blogs, and so how much more important does it become for our organizations to have accurate, good information out there to compete with the other things that may not be as accurate.

So with that as context, let me just back up a little bit and give a little more information about what blogs are and how they work and this is just a picture, as an example, of my own blog. Blogs are essentially in the format of an online diary. It doesn't have to be a tell-all, confessional kind of thing. It can be any kind of news you want to put up there, resources, information, or a commentary, and the way it works is when you write a post it goes up to the top of the blog and so they are essentially in reverse chronological order and a typical blog will be updated maybe a few times a week. It really depends on the organization that's doing it and how actively they

want to do it and blogs usually provide a place for the readers to comment on the posts that are written. Generally the comments show up underneath the main blog post. So it really provides a place for readers and the blogger to engage in a conversation about whatever the topic is. This is an example of a blog post from a site that I blog on sometimes called Marketing Profs and this was a post talking about a kind of anti-consumerist campaign that was taking on Project Red, which is Bono's Cause Marketing Campaign and I'm just using this as an example because you can see it has over fifty comments and within the comment section here we had lots of just regular marketers talking about this with each other and giving their opinions, but we also had representatives of the anti-Project Red Campaign talking about their rationale for doing it and then someone from Project Red showed up and joined the conversation and it really is truly a conversation. So it's not just a one-way source of information. It's people engaging with each other and talking about these issues together. And a blog is a place for you to tell your story, to put a face on the issue. The best blogs have an authentic voice. It needs to seem like a real person is writing it in order to get people to connect with it. If it seems like just another P.R. source of information, people will dismiss it and not give it credibility and so the content would be much more engaging if there's an actual person associated with the blog that people can connect with.

So just briefly, here are some ways that blogs can lead to behavioral change. They can build awareness and spread the word about a particular issue. They can provide social support if you have someone whose blogging who has a particular health condition for example, talking about the challenges they're facing and what life is like for them. Other people who are in the same situation can relate and perhaps get some strength from seeing other people going through that or get ideas for how they can deal with their own issues. It can be a place for bringing together multiple media. If you have a lot of different pieces of a campaign, you can have your YouTube videos on there and your social network and talk about what's going on there and bring people in. You can involve people who are affected by the problem in coming up with solutions. Because of the way that you can hold conversations within blogs, you can really bring people together and get dialogs going. You can provide ways for people to take action. Give them daily tips for what to do or action items. If you see certain questions coming up in the comments, you can then answer it within the comments section or that might be a tip to you that you need to do a blog post specifically on that issue. And also, blogs just humanize the issue; they put a face on it. They put a face on your organization also, which makes people feel more comfortable in dealing with your organization

I'm just going to give a very brief case study on something that I was involved with earlier this year called The Pandemic Flu Leadership blog. This is something that the Department of Health and Human Services put together as kind of a way to work around an event that they were holding, The Pandemic Flu Leadership Summit, which was in June, and so they had this blog to kind of encourage conversation and get the issues kind of rolling before the Summit. So for three weeks before the Summit and then we had various blog posts and conversations and then at the Summit it was live blogged, which means that there were people there at the Summit taking notes and writing up the sessions and then, as soon as they could, posting it up so that people who weren't there could at least feel like they knew what was going on, and then for two weeks after, kind of processing what happened and what were the next steps. So Mike Leavitt, the Secretary of HHS, actually wrote a few posts as part of it. He kicked it off and ended it and I think he had a couple more posts in between there, so we had a very official and premature on

there and they also had kind of a stable of different guest bloggers who represented various constituencies. I was on there kind of talking about the issue from a social marketing perspective. There was Pierre Omidyar who is the founder of eBay; George Benjamin, the Executive Director of APHA; Sister Patricia Talone of the Catholic Health Association; and a number of other people who were participating. Now the blog was coordinated by Ogilvie P.R., so they took care of all the logistics and every week they provided us a different question that we should address within our blog posts. Comments were enabled, so they did allow people to leave comments on each post, but they were moderated so there was some; it had to go through a process where there was a time delay between when someone would submit a comment and when it would appear. And once the blog was up and running it became very clear that there was a community of very passionate people who are working on this issue, just as concerned citizens. In fact, many of them kind of organized online on a couple of sites. One of them was the flu wiki forum, one of them was the pandemic flu information forum, where they share information and coordinate with each other about various pandemic flu issues and they were kind of coordinating their response to what was going on, on the HHS blog where they were feeling like, well, they started off very kind of distrustful of the government. They weren't sure what was going to happen with this and they, many of these flubees, as they call themselves, have a, their main issue is that they feel that the government is not promoting a long enough period that people need to be prepared for in terms of their supplies. So this was their main issue that many, many, many of them commented over and over and over again on each of the posts with these issues and unfortunately those issues never were picked up on and addressed by any kind of official sources. So, unfortunately this constituency of very concerned citizens who kind of started off hopeful that maybe this would act as a bridge between their community and HHS, they unfortunately got kind of cynical about it and started coming up with random conspiracy theories and things, so that unfortunately wasn't (...*small recording gap*...) think about next time you want to reach out to different constituencies and thank you for coming.

[Janice Nall] Alright, I know you have questions. Who has a question? Yes, please come to the microphone. Thank you, Neidra.

[conference Participant] A question on the blogging. Is there a style-book, if you will, for blogging and etiquette, so that (...*small recording gap*) poor blogging?

[Neidra Wienreich] There has been a lot written online, on blogs particularly, about best practices in terms of blogging, in terms of what do you do with comments and how often should you post and things like that, and I don't know of something specifically, and certainly bloggers are not monolithic constituencies, so there's not necessarily consistency among bloggers, but there are rules of netiquette and you can find that online if you do just a search on blogged netiquette, I'm sure.

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